

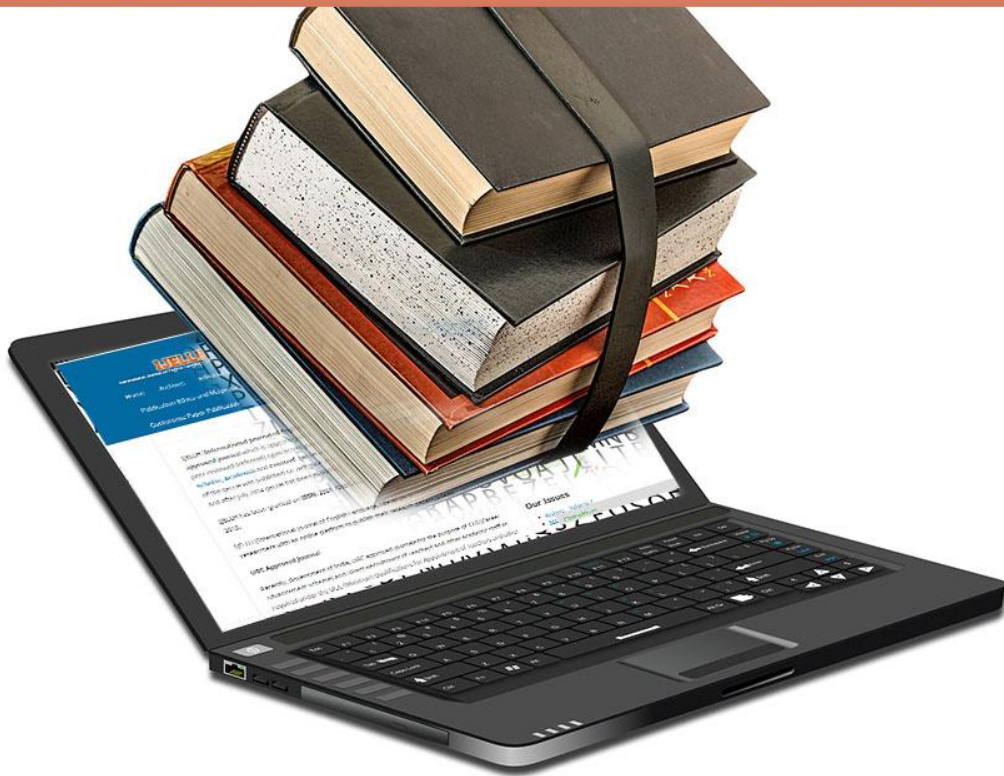
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Faith and Sin in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*

Abstract

Graham Green's *The Heart of the Matter* examines the concept of faith in its true nature. Greene portrays the character of Henry Scobie with a dilemma of good and evil and is made to choose between the two. The psychological trauma he undergoes is the main focus of the novel. He is constantly tormented by the thoughts of salvation and damnation. This paper, "Faith and Sin in Graham Green's *The Heart of the Matter*", studies Scobie's actions in the light of Catholic faith and concludes that ultimately sin and corruption effect one's spiritual life.

Greene is one of the most prolific writers of the twentieth century. He has twenty novels, three plays, three travel books and a number of essays to his credit. Green writes about human existence with its inadequacies and limitations from Catholic point of view. All his works portray the heroes having a psychological trauma in the backdrop of religion in modern age. Mark Bosco writes :

Catholicism in Green's literary works serves to raise the standards, heighten the awareness of the fallen sense of the world and challenge characters to respond to

extreme situations in full knowledge of what is at stake. Religion inevitably becomes part of Green's dark and seedy terrain, from which Green's creativity draws inspiration.¹

The protagonist of *The Heart of the Matter* is Henry Scobie, a police officer in a British colony in West Africa. He converts to Catholic to marry Louise, a woman with no physical attractiveness, "a catholic convert married to a discontented nagging catholic wife."² Scobie doesn't feel romantically connected to her, but because of his religious consciousness, feels responsible for her. Louise too feels a sense of aloofness from him and maintains a false social and religious commitment with him. Louise is a weak character, an emotionally fragile woman, with a melancholic temperament. She could neither inspire love in her husband nor ensure the harmony of their marital togetherness. There is no love as such between them but they remain inextricably bound to one another in terms of social and religious perspective. Also the couple's relationship is at crumbling state because of their child's death some years ago. With the death of her child haunting her mind, Louise feeds on memories, books and poetry as a kind of escape from the bitter realities of physical existence. She is a pitiable creature burdened with all these aspects. Such a woman with a sense of dependence and weakness, needs strength and real love from husband to develop her true self. The failure of her husband to offer these comforts, drives her to find her peace alone, away from him.

Louise, frustrated by her husband's formal and artificial relationship, wants to leave him and go to South Africa. Scobie doesn't have enough money to afford the voyage and not wanting to frustrate her, goes to a local money lender Yusef, an evil Syrian trader and borrows the required amount from him and sends his wife to South Africa. Scobie's contact with Yusef marks the beginning of the moral decay of "Scobie the Just".

Brighton Rock, *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter* constitute the trilogy of Graham Greene as these three deal with sin and damnation of man. All three central characters of these novels are represented as members of a fallen world. Greene chooses theological aspects as the themes of his works since he himself has religious upbringing. The characters, though have familial bondage fall into a trap of worldly enticements with which different psychological conflicts arise. They exemplify human traits, and show utter weakness to fight social and psychological evil. They live under an unholy amount of stress and fall prey to corrupt society. They feel the impact of violence controlling them and many of them resort to it. They are aware of being either the agents or the victims of an evil that is always abroad in the world or lurking in their own natures. All of them are men fighting with their own self to curb the strong forces of evil that take a hold of their character and they are painfully aware of their guilt and sin and their personal failure. In this regard Diana O'Neil says:

The strength of Greene's writing as a novelist who is a Catholic comes from his obsession with man's burden of sin. Not so much the act as the guilt after the act, and the impotence that fails to hinder repetition. Certainly the view he takes of sin is a delimiting one, for he does not take up the question excluded but his obsession—how should a man with no religious beliefs find a moral basis for his actions.... The obsession is pressurized by the acceptance of God.³

The setting of the novel contributes to the moral decay of the hero. It is a British colony in West Africa. The small town is in a degenerate state both physically and morally. The moral climate of the place is in perfect harmony with the geographical climate. The sense of evil and decay pervades every object in the atmosphere. There are the "ugly flap-ping birds", the "swollen pye-dogs", "the smell of a zoo, of sawdust, excrement etc. And in society one notices corruption, dishonesty and moral decay,

added to this. Hypocrisy, falsehood, evasions, bribery, lawlessness, and shadiness of temperament and behavior are present everywhere. Scobie could always detect the odor of human meanness and injustice around, he notices,

“It is a climate for meanness, malice, snobbery, but anything like hate or love drives a man off his head. Heaven remained rigidly in its proper place on the other side of death, and on this side flourished the injustices, the cruelties, the meanness that elsewhere people so cleverly hushed up. Here you could love human beings nearly as God loved them, knowing the worst; you didn't love a pose, a pretty dress, a sentiment artfully assumed.”⁴

As the action of the novel progresses, the moral situation of Scobie becomes more and more complex. A ship wreck brings the victims to the shores of West Africa. The arrival of a boat carrying the unfortunate victims make Scobie driven further into the web of emotional and spiritual crisis. Among the survivors there is a child, waiting at the door of Death. And a young woman of 19 named Helen. Trying to save the woman from the grave situation Scobie develops an attachment with her and it slowly forms to be an illegitimate bondage. This relationship makes Scobie to fall into a moral degeneration. He had sworn to preserve Louise's happiness in the holy union of matrimony, but now he had accepted another contradictory responsibility. Whatever is left of his love for Louise now disappears and he goes all out for Helen. But the cost of the desertion and commitment are terrible.

The letter he writes to Helen asserting his love for her is more a confinement than a mere show of his romance to her, Naturally he feels that this letter is "a sense of corruption". More importantly, this letter implies that his affection grows to so menacing a proportion as

to cloud his faith in God. And the statement “The sky wept endlessly around him”⁵ shows how even nature laments over Scobie's blind acceptance of sinful path.

Scobie being a staunch practitioner of the Catholic faith suffers from an inner struggle when he finds himself with deep relationship with Helen. It causes a more intense crisis in both the emotional and spiritual realms of his life. In this regard critic Michael G. Brennan says that “Greene’s protagonist, Scobie suffers an apparent irreversible immersion in self-deceiving despair that takes a firm hold over his mind. Faustus-like Scobie is seduced by a dangerous pride in his own flawed rationality.”⁶

The whole action of the novel revolves round the character of Scobie. These actions individually and collectively constitute for the down fall of his character. First he lies to himself by destroying any reminder of pain in his house, even the picture of his own dead child. Then he lies to his wife by pretending to still love her and by making a show of satisfying all her needs, but he fails in his relationship with his wife. He fails to give her love and thereby marital serenity which she desperately yearns for. And he fixes voyage by borrowing money from a proclaimed enemy of law, the law which it is his duty to protect. He does it, unmindful of "how far this action might carry him.” And his affair with Helen too is his willing indulgence. He involves in it knowing fully well about the consequences. At the mundane level, the stand taken by him cannot be called blameworthy. But his promise to her “I will always be here if you need me, as long as I'm 'alive’” puts him in a critical light, for this commitment runs contradictory to the solemn vow he has made at the time of marriage to keep Louise happy. As such, he can bring happiness, not to speak of love, neither to his wife nor to Helen. Committing such sins, he betrays himself, betrays his wife, betrays his mistress, betrays his religion, betrays his professional responsibility and all this ultimately results in the betrayal of God.

There can be no salvation for him now. He is fully aware of the magnitude of his sin. There is nothing he could do to escape from it. Since he is a man with religious consciousness, his conscience doesn't permit him to reject Helen and reunite with Louise. Neither he could stay with his wife and keep Helen as a mistress. Hence it is inevitable that he chooses death as alternative. One of the significant aspects of strength and integrity of this novel is the way Greene depicts this process. He sees that neither sentimentality nor dogmatic rigidity obscures the natural consequences of the sins of Scobie. His contemplation before his suicide:

“ O God I am the only guilty one because I have known the answers all the time. I have preferred to give you pain rather than give pain to Helen or my wife because I can't observe your suffering. I can't desert either of them while I am alive, but I can die and remove myself from their blood stream. ... God I can't go on month after month , insulting you... I am going to dam myself , whatever that means ... you will be able to forget me God, for eternity.”⁷

Through the character of Scobie, Greene gives a diagnostic portrayal of the essence of human predicament. Man has the potentiality for both damnation and salvation. What is wrong with Scobie is that he does not want to plead for the mercy of God, for he thinks that his sin is too great to be forgiven. Towards the close of the novel, he gives expression to his inner torment and anguish: “ Oh God you'll be better off if you lose me once and for all. I know what I'm doing. I am not pleading for mercy. I am going to damn myself, whatever that means.”⁸ This is the most tragic mistake one could commit. For, it implies that he has lost confidence in the power of the Almighty to save His children, to bring salvation to His own creations. Marie Beatrice Mesnet is right when she says: Scobie's ultimate fault is to believe that his sin is too great for God to forgive it.”⁹

The major preoccupation of Graham Greene in *The Heart of the Matter* is an artistic exploration of the territory of Evil in all its manifestation. Isolation and failure, falsehood and treachery, squalor and corruption, crime and violence, sin and suffering, abnormal, excessive exhibitions of pity and compassion and innocence, most importantly loss of faith in the Savior. It does not mean that Greene's view of life is one that of hopelessness and destructive pessimism. The essence of the Greenian thematic conception is about the forces of Life and Death, a conflict of devil and the angel found in the same individual. This conflict which is presented in the back drop of religion is what makes it increasingly complex for the humans to comprehend the nature and meaning of it and work out the ultimate salvation.

Scobie, the protagonist, in him the devil and the angel, the sinner and the saint meet and unfortunately the sinner wins over the saint. The meaning and relevance of *The Heart of the Matter* is misery and meanness that are the order of human life. A sense of failure and the inevitability of fate seems to haunt our lives all the time. And faith alone can be the path for salvation.

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